WHY MARRIAGES FAIL

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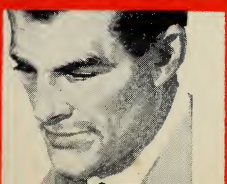

John A. O'Brien, Ph.D.

Why Marriages Fail

A Scientific Study Based on 7,000
Case Histories

By
JOHN A. O'BRIEN, Ph.D.

AVE MARIA PRESS
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556

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Ninth Printing, December, 1965

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Why Marriages Fail

Edithe and Bert were married just eight months when their marriage blew up. They came to me seeking a way out. They wanted to call it "quits," get an annulment so they could be free to look for other partners who might bring them the happiness they had failed so miserably to find in this union.

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

"He's inconsiderate and mean," sobbed Edithe, "even cruel. Always wants his own way."

"She's impossible," snapped Bert, "still tied to auntie's apron strings. Rushes home to auntie every time we have a little tiff, doesn't know what marriage is all about."

As they bandied accusations back and forth, I could see the customary elements shaping up into a pattern which is so

familiar to every experienced family counselor.

Entering into marriage with high hopes of enduring love and happiness, like many newlyweds they had worked out no plan of dealing with the little differences which inevitably arise. Neither had they received any pre-marriage counseling concerning the booby traps and the hidden mines with which virtually every marital path is strewn.

The result was that the fragile castle of their dreams came tumbling down about their heads: they were still in love but could see no way of bridging the differences which cropped up only after the rice had been thrown.

Root of Trouble

A little friendly probing disclosed the root of the trouble. Edithe was an orphan, raised by a spinster aunt from whom she got the notion that the conjugal relation was something nasty and degrading. She had permitted it only a half dozen times and always with reluctance as a necessary condescension to the animalistic male.

This had led to tensions during which Bert had lost his temper and said some sharp things. Arguments ensued, feelings were hurt and thus they had come to what they thought was the parting of the ways.

The root of the trouble was first laid

bare. Then it was explained to Edithe that, far from being something evil, the conjugal relation was divinely ordained as the means not only of procreation but also of deepening mutual affection and binding the partners more closely together in the mighty bond of deathless love. A new and enchanting vista opened to them and they left, hand in hand, determined to make a go of the marriage which in their callow inexperience they had nearly wrecked. "Happiness," remarked Edithe, "was knocking at our door and I didn't have sense enough to let it in."

In that incident there are mirrored the disappointments, headaches and heartaches which approximately a million people suffer each year as their marital barks hit the rocks of recurrent estrangement, legal separation and divorce. In sharp contrast to America's technological preeminence among the nations, flooding the world, as she does, with mechanical and electrical gadgets, is the pathetic spectacle of falling apart at her own domestic seams. No other people are paying so ghastly a toll as ours and in a domain where happiness is so desperately craved, and where stability is of such paramount importance.

It is of little use simply to lament the fact. What is needed is to lay bare the causes of the domestic malady and to ap-

ply remedial measures. More than thirty years of marriage counseling have convinced me that we can render young couples planning marriage two great services: 1. Disclose the booby traps and the hidden mines in marriage—the cause of marital strife and failure. 2. Provide them with a technique for the handling of these hazards and of the differences which are sure to arise.

Why Marriages Fail

Why, then, do marriages fail? I've sat at the bench with judges and listened to the testimony of witnesses in numerous cases in the domestic courts of New York and Chicago. But the specific causes are usually camouflaged under such vague legal generalities that the investigator gets little aid from this source. Thus nearly half of all divorces are granted on the grounds of cruelty.

Cruelty is, however, an umbrella term which covers a spacious territory. When to cruelty is added the adjective "mental," the term then can cover almost any factor making for the failure of the marriage. Studies of divorce records show that the terms cruelty or mental cruelty were used to cover such varied items as beating one's wife, adultery, coming home late at night or trumping the husband's ace.

In southern California a young bride sued her husband, a football coach, for divorce. "On what grounds?" asked the judge.

"Mental cruelty," she replied.

"Just what was the cruelty?" persisted the judge.

"He diagramed," she said, "the plays of his football team on the nice fluffy biscuits I baked for his breakfast." If the judge had not happened to push his inquiry, the silly triviality mentioned would have remained hidden under the misleading mask of mental cruelty.

To get at the real cause of marriage failure, then, one must penetrate beyond the vague generalities mentioned in the divorce petitions to personal conferences with both parties. To be significant and representative, the findings must be based on thousands of cases and hence usually beyond the experience of any one marriage counselor.

Reconciliation Court

Thousands of failing marriages are brought to the Marriage Reconciliation Court established by the authorities of a large Catholic archdiocese with more than a million members. Before a couple files suit for legal separation or divorce they are asked to submit their case to expert

counselors who investigate every angle. Each party tells his story with frankness and in detail, knowing that the counselor must have the real facts before he will act.

Every effort is then made either to remove the booby trap or to show the couple how they can walk warily around it. As a result thousands of couples are reconciled and marriages headed for the divorce courts are salvaged, to the immense benefit of the husband and wife, the children and society. Where the case is absolutely hopeless, arrangements are then made to secure legal separation or divorce.

Here then, if ever, we can get at the actual specific causes of marital failure. Through the kind cooperation of the counselors of the Reconciliation Court I was privileged to study the records. In addition each of the four counselors drew up a list of the ten chief causes of marital disruption in all the cases assigned for his mediation. Recently, Dr. John L. Thomas, assistant director of the Institute of Social Order, St. Louis University, subjected 7,000 of these marriage failures to painstaking study and analysis to get at their real causes.

Since Dr. Thomas is an experienced research scholar in this field and uses objective standards for the appraisal of the importance of the numerous factors criss-

crossing in nearly every case, the results of his analysis are of special significance. He began by separating for special treatment the obviously non-typical cases where the marriage was contracted under circumstances that placed unusual roadblocks in the way of its stability and success.

These included "war marriages," marriages in which the bride was pregnant at marriage, marriages in which children were absolutely excluded from the beginning, and marriages of widows and/or widowers. Subsequent analysis disclosed that these categories contain cases which present their own distinct patterns of disintegration. They are not therefore representative of the normal marriage which is not saddled from the very beginning with such hazards.

The nontypical cases just mentioned constituted about 20 per cent of the 7,000 cases. An analysis of the remaining 80 per cent revealed the nine chief factors which stymied the hopes and ambitions of the couples for domestic peace and happiness.

Chief Culprit

The chief culprit proved to be drink. It brought misery and disaster to more couples than any other single factor, being responsible for 29.8 per cent of the marriage failures. These do not include the cases wherein excessive drinking occurred

only after dissatisfaction with the union developed. In such cases it is more properly considered a "symptom" and not a causal factor in the breakdown. Here are included only those cases in which the excessive use of alcohol appears to have been the major factor in the maladjustment.

It is worth noting that drinking as such never appears alone: it brings in its train many other evil consequences, notably, financial difficulties. Alcohol has become one of the most expensive items humans consume and a frequent companion in misery to it is nonsupport of the family.

"Joe seems to have a hole in his pocket," remarked his wife. "His week's wages slip through it so fast that he brings but little home for the family." A little probing quickly disclosed that it poured out of Joe's pocket as fast as he poured liquor down his gullet.

Another frequent companion, or rather by-product, of drinking is irritableness, belligerency, cruel and abusive treatment of wife and even of the children.

"Bob was always pleasant and considerate before he began to drink excessively," said Evelyn. "Now when he comes home, he gives a little peck at my cheek, says 'Hello' to the kids, and then pours himself out four stout Martini cocktails.

After downing these he becomes sullen and disagreeable. He flies into a rage when the children get a bit noisy and we are all on edge—wondering upon whom his wrath is next to fall. It's ruining our marriage."

A third evil consequence of excessive drinking is that it occasionally leads to association with doubtful characters of the opposite sex—the "bar-flies" and the "B" girls who are paid to stimulate patrons to squander their money in excessive drinking. Some of these tavern envoys do not hesitate to increase their earnings by leading their inebriates into actions which violate their vow of conjugal fidelity.

Men—Chief Offenders

In but a few cases was the wife guilty of excessive drinking. The social stigma attached to women who indulge excessively is much greater than that incurred by men and doubtless serves as at least a partial deterrent. Then, too, the frequentation of taverns by single women is frowned upon much more seriously than in the case of men.

The finding of Dr. Thomas that excessive drinking is the leading factor in the disruption of marriage was confirmed by the analysis of the four counselors at the Reconciliation Court. Judge John A.

Sharbaro of Chicago, who has heard thousands of divorce cases and has made serious efforts to penetrate to the underlying causes, was recently asked by a news reporter:

"What, judge, in your experience is the most frequent cause of divorce?"

Without a moment's hesitation the judge replied: "Drink."

It is high time that the danger which excessive drinking offers to the success of a marriage be frankly recognized. No useful purpose is served by assigning such vague terms as cruelty or uncongeniality to the chief villain in the domestic drama when it is plain old-fashioned drunkenness.

Some writers are inclined to dismiss rather flippantly such factors as drinking and even adultery as merely symptomatic and seek for "causal" factors in the depths of the individual's personality. But sociologists, psychologists and psychiatrists are in the widest disagreement in their views on depth psychology. Hence the "causal" factor which each advances turns out to be little more than a reflection of his own particular theory of personality—behaviorism, Freudianism, cultural determinism or an eclectic hodge-podge of all these.

The Safer Course

We all know what drunkenness is, even

though we may not be able to trace out its causal roots. That's a task now engaging the attention of an army of research scientists. It is sufficient for our purpose to point out that excessive drinking can lead, and is now actually leading, to the disintegration of thousands of marriages. It is the worst enemy of a young couple launching their bark on the matrimonial seas.

Wherever either one of the couple has found from previous experience that drinking is a danger that threatens to gain the upper hand, it is advisable for both parties to eschew liquor entirely. Indeed, it is safer for every young couple who wants to get the most out of their marriage to underwrite its stability and success by the avoidance of alcohol in every form. It is an unnecessary, costly and dangerous indulgence and this study spells out the headaches and the heartaches it brings to thousands.

Adultery ranks second, accounting for 24.8 per cent of the marriage failures. In four out of every five cases the husband was the guilty partner. With the numerous opportunities for infidelity afforded by modern society, especially in large urban communities, individuals of a weak character or with a low moral code easily succumb. Ranking this cause in second place squares

likewise with the findings of Paul J. Bicksler, a marriage counselor with years of experience.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the marriage contract rests upon a vow pledging mutual fidelity. It begets not merely a legal but a moral and a religious obligation. All the sanctions of morality and religion stand behind it. Where faith and trust are undermined, love cannot long survive.

Irresponsible and Immature

Irresponsibility is the third most frequent factor, accounting for the break-up of 12.4 per cent of the marriages. It means the failure to shoulder the basic obligations of marriage. Some prefer to label this trait "immaturity." It represents a strange attitude: the individual seems to consider himself entitled to all the privileges of marriage but curiously free from most of its responsibilities.

A core of unadulterated selfishness runs through the person's make-up. Typical of such individuals is the common practice of deserting the wife when the onset of pregnancy causes her to lose her job or the birth of a child makes new demands upon the husband. Frequently he was raised as "mama's boy," waited on hand and foot, and never trained to think of others or to

Why Marriages Fail

Cause	*Per cent*
1. Excessive drinking	29.8
2. Unfaithfulness	24.8
3. Irresponsibility	12.4
4. Difference of temperament	12.1
5. In-law trouble	7.2
6. Sex maladjustments	5.4
7. Mental illness	3.0
8. Religious differences	2.9
9. Financial difficulties	0.7
10. Miscellaneous	1.7

shoulder responsibility of any kind. The result is he remains emotionally immature, self-centered and socially irresponsible. More than 50 per cent of these marriages broke up in the first five years and an additional 25 per cent in the next five-year span.

"Clarence," reported his wife, "was always running to mama with every problem that came up. We couldn't sit down and talk it over together. He would have to ask mama what we were to do. I scarcely knew whether I was married to him or to his mother. To top it all, he couldn't hold any job and had no sense of obligation to help me make both ends meet."

He is a typical example of the social unawareness and curious immaturity which characterizes those in this category.

Sometimes it is the wife who is tied to mama's apron strings. "During World War II," said a broken-hearted husband to me recently, "I was stationed for a while in Australia. There I met Dora and married her. I brought her here, established a nice home and soon our baby came. Dora was always talking about her mother and pined for her.

"We went back for a six months' visit but my business and our livelihood were in the United States so I had to return. Dora promised to follow me back in a month.

But over a year has gone by now and she refuses to return. She says she loves me but can't leave her mama."

Though 26 years old, Dora is emotionally immature: the psychological counterpart of the umbilical cord had never been severed and she refuses to shoulder the normal responsibility of a wife and mother.

Difference of Temperament

The fourth factor is radical difference of temperament, which causes 12.1 per cent of the marriages to fail. Where there is a basic incompatibility of disposition, character and temperament, there is little to hold a couple together. The thread of sexual attraction wears exceedingly thin under the irritating tensions of clashing temperaments and finally snaps altogether. The records of cases in this category are filled with accusations of jealousy, neglect, meanness, mental cruelty, "queerness," insistence upon always having one's own way, being "ornery," "just plain mean" and "impossible to live with."

"Fred's jealousy," complained Barbara, "is ruining our marriage. After every social gathering, there's a scene when we get home. No matter how reserved I've been, he accuses me of having smiled at some of the men—'egging them on,' he calls it. He's full of suspicions and is always im-

agining things. It's taken all the joy out of our marriage and is making a nervous wreck out of me."

Too bad that Barbara didn't detect that trait during courtship. The chief purpose of keeping company is to enable young people to find congenial partners with similar tastes and interests and to screen out those whose temperament and disposition are irritating. It is folly to imagine that a conflicting temperament will suddenly be changed by the wedding ceremony.

In-law Trouble

The fifth factor in disrupting marriages is in-law trouble. Although this much-talked-of problem occurs in some degree or other in many, if not in most, marriages, it turned out to be the major factor of disruption in only 7.2 per cent of marital failures. When it is the chief "bone of contention," however, its centrifugal force pulls the couple apart more rapidly than many of the other disintegrating factors. Thus more than two-thirds of the marriages, in which this was the major cause of trouble, endured less than five years.

"When Ray's parents come to spend a few days with us," said Peg, "I brace myself for an ordeal. His father is friendly and pleasant and we get along well. But his mother undertakes to tell me how

to run every detail of our home—from how to cook to how to nurse the baby and make the children mind. Her visits rub me raw and if they were more frequent I'm afraid I just couldn't take it."

Getting along with in-laws is usually a fine art, calling for tact and diplomacy. Allowance must be made for the tendency of parents to think of their married son or daughter as their little child and wish to mother it still. Patience, sympathetic understanding and a capacity to see the humorous aspect in such tendencies will enable the bride or groom to keep the in-law relationships on an even keel.

It is a mistake to look upon in-laws as rivals for a mate's affection. Filial love differs vastly from conjugal love and in the heart of every spouse there is room for both. Big-heartedness, a willingness to view with tolerant understanding the well-meant but often intrusive suggestions of in-laws will yield rich dividends in domestic peace and happiness. It would help matters, too, if parental in-laws would try to realize that their children do grow up and, when married, owe their first allegiance to their mate.

Sex Maladjustments

The sixth factor is sex maladjustment, accounting for 5.4 per cent of the failures. Although this topic has been played up in

recent literature as the root of virtually all marital unhappiness, the records show that it is the major factor in but comparatively few break-ups. The assumption running through this literature that so-called "sexual incompatibility" is the cause of most marriage difficulties is a classic example of putting the cart before the horse.

From the intimate nature of the conjugal relationship it is inevitable that strains and tensions in other areas will be reflected here. Since the mental attitude is of such paramount importance in this basic relation, slights, vexations, and hurts, no matter how carefully repressed and hidden, here sound their psychic repercussions and take their revenge. If the tensions and vexations from the other areas of domestic life are washed out, the maladjustments in the sexual domain quickly vanish. The idea that the human race, or at least, Western man, had to wait until the middle of the twentieth century for so-called "sexologists" to discover the "right" technique for the most fundamental relationship of marriage is naive if not ludicrous.

All the really scientific studies show that sexual adjustments are not automatic, not dependent upon the presence of some magical "sex compatibility," but for the most part are achieved in time through mutual understanding, frankness, sympathy and help.

Indeed, even where the adjustment never reaches the stage of perfection, the happiness of the couple is not appreciably impaired. The essential happiness of marriage lies in a *shared* companionship; in the attainment of that goal, social, cultural, psychical and spiritual elements play the dominant roles.

Mental Illness

The seventh factor is mental illness, accounting for 3 per cent of the breakups. In this category are included only those cases in which one of the parties has been institutionalized or has been judged ill by a psychiatrist. Much family strife would be obviated if a couple would recognize that illness may befall the mind as well as the body, and then turn to competent psychiatrists for assistance. What a partner not infrequently regards as an inconsiderate or vexing act of his mate, stemming from plain meanness, is often the result of a psychic disorder that no amount of arguing can remedy.

Differences over religion constitute the eighth factor, embracing 2.9 per cent of the failures. This low figure is probably traceable to the fact that an understanding of mutual obligations was required in advance. Differences in religion frequently extend to other areas of domestic life and tend to

exercise an unstabilizing influence.

Money troubles constitute the ninth factor, accounting for .7 per cent of the failures. Although some disagreement over the use of money arises at times in almost every family it seems to be the major factor in the breakup of exceedingly few. It was frequently mentioned in cases where excessive drinking was involved but obviously it was the unhappy consequence of such overindulgence. Working out a family budget which keeps the expenditures well within the income, and adhering to that budget, will eliminate many financial worries and disagreements.

In the tenth category—unclassifiable miscellaneous items—were placed the remaining 1.7 per cent of the failures. Human nature is so varied that eccentricities shoot out in the strangest directions and cause complications which fit none of the previously mentioned categories.

These then are the nine major factors which brought disruption to the thousands of marriages included in this painstaking study. While the disintegrating force of each factor may vary in different communities, there is no doubt that they are the principal causes of marriage failure in the United States. They are the booby traps and the hidden mines which each year wreck the marriages of about a million

people, bringing misery and unhappiness to them and to their children.

There is unfortunately no method of removing these dangers from the highways of marriage, no method of throttling their destructive violence and fury, for they are rooted in human nature itself. But we can greatly lessen their menace by marking off these areas and bidding the travelers to watch their step in these danger zones. To forewarn is to forearm. If married couples and those preparing to wed are thoroughly cautioned concerning these booby traps and mined areas of the domestic life there is reason to believe that we can reduce to a minimum the vast number of explosions now marking the American homefront.

What is desperately needed by every newly wedded couple is a technique for the handling of the differences which so often lead to such explosions. Differences will inevitably arise but they can be discussed with calmness and understanding and settled through reason tempered with good will and love. If these elements are lacking, no disagreement, no matter how small, can be composed; if they are present, there is no difficulty, no matter how large, for which some solution can't be found.

Reprinted from St. Joseph *Magazine, April, 1954.*
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To remind couples of those hazards we have formulated these ten commandments.

TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR A HAPPY MARRIAGE

1. Thou shalt make thy promise of mutual love and loyalty a vow to God, binding until death.

2. Thou shalt abstain from the angry word which wounds more deeply than a sword.

3. Thou shalt respect the personality of thy mate and not seek to dominate or tyrannize.

4. Thou shalt allow no in-laws to interfere with the running of thy home.

5. Thou shalt abstain from drink where alcohol is a danger to either party.

6. Thou shalt make a family budget and observe it.

7. Thou shalt eschew pettiness, nagging selfishness, jealousy and false pride.

8. Thou shalt grow in consideration and love each day and share thy interests and pleasures to a maximum.

9. Thou shalt love thy children as God's supreme gift and rear them to be good citizens with a sense of honor, tolerance and fair play.

10. Thou shalt kneel together in prayer each night, knowing that the family that prays together stays together.